

FOREWORD

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INTERVIEW WITH DONALD M. WILSON, DEPUTY DIRECTOR,
U. S. INFORMATION AGENCY ---- BY JAMES GREENFIELD,
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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GREENFIELD: "Don, you knew President Kennedy a long time before many people knew him and perhaps a long time before many people ever thought of him as a Presidential candidate. Can you remember the first time you met Jack Kennedy and what happened?"

WILSON: "I met him in the spring of 1956 when I was the LIFE Bureau Chief here. I really don't remember the first time I met him, but I had a number of occasions to talk to him during that spring. In the summer of 1956 I went to the Democratic convention and was assigned to cover his efforts to become the Vice-Presidential nominee. I remember going up to his hotel suite right after Adlai Stevenson had thrown the convention open. The Kennedys were not prepared any more than anyone else was for what had happened. I was one of the first people to get there and Senator Kennedy and Bob Kennedy were there and a couple of members of the family and that was about it. Otherwise the suite was empty. Then suddenly things began to happen. The other members and major leaders of the Democratic Party showed up during all that night and the next morning.

loyal soldier and he realized, I guess, that he wasn't supposed to know about it. So we went back to USIA and pretty much operated in the dark during the Bay of Pigs thing. It was very unfortunate and poorly handled from all points of view and certainly from the propaganda point of view."

GREENFIELD: "Well, how about the Cuban missile crisis? Was that the same kind of story? Do you recollect your own relationship during that time, both in the government apparatus and with the President himself?"

WILSON: "That was a totally different type of operation. Ed Murrow had just been operated on and was convalescing at the time and was out during the whole thing. He was up in New York State - so I was in charge of USIA. A Cabinet meeting was held on Wednesday, October 17, as I recall, of that week -- a routine Cabinet meeting to discuss keeping down expenditures in the government and keeping down levels of personnel. After the Cabinet meeting Bob Kennedy came up to me and said 'Will Ed Murrow be in town this week-end?' and I said, 'No, he's too weak - he won't be able to come back to work for a long while yet.' Bob was disappointed and then said, 'Well, where will you be this week-end?' I said 'I'm going away to New Jersey.' And he said, 'Well, don't go.' So I said, 'Okay.' And I

which broadcasts in Spanish, could be heard over all these frequencies in Cuba. All these stations could be heard in Cuba. As it turned out there were eleven of them that were the best. In order to put this operation into effect I needed to tell three people about it at USIA. One was the Director of the Voice of America, Henry Loomis. One was the Deputy Director for Policy and Plans, Thomas Sorensen, and the third was Hewson Ryan, who was our Assistant Director for Latin American Affairs. And Ball and Martin gave me approval to fill these three men in on the situation. I had alerted them the night before that they should be within telephone distance on Saturday so I called them in and told them what the story was and we went to work. They were the only people in USIA who knew about the situation until about noon on Monday when it began to break a bit when the fact was announced that the President would speak.

"On Saturday I went to a meeting in the Oval Room upstairs at the White House. It was a very dramatic meeting - the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, General Taylor, Mr. Ball, Mr. Martin, Mr. John McCone, Mr. Lovett, Ted Sorensen, Mac Bundy and perhaps several others, were all seated around in the Oval Room. The President was in his rocking chair and the discussion mainly revolved

around how long the story would hold before breaking in the newspaper, and what would be the most advantageous time to address the American people. This was Saturday -- I would say in the afternoon -- and the question was whether the speech should be on Sunday or Monday. Of course a great deal was going on at that time -- the military was being cranked up and it was agreed at this meeting that if it could possibly hold until Monday it would be advantageous, but the President should be prepared to address the people on Sunday night. As it turned out it did hold and the President was able to address them on Monday. I went to a series of meetings, some with the President and some without, over the week-end. I know when the President heard that I had requested and received permission to tell three other people at USIA, he was very upset about it -- as he was during that week-end when he heard about anyone else knowing about it -- because of course he was naturally concerned that the more people that knew, the more danger there would be of this being revealed."

GREENFIELD: "What was his own mood during that time, generally? How would you describe his mood?"

WILSON: "He was completely in charge. He was very calm and he was very serious. There was no humor that I can recall, at that

particular time and everybody was working very hard. But the mood was somber and serious and very businesslike. The USIA operation, in getting the radio stations alerted, was an interesting one. First of all we had to determine which stations we needed, and then we determined who controlled the stations, i. e., who were the men who owned the stations who could make the decision to turn them over to the Voice of America. Then we made preliminary plans for telephone lines to be linked up to these stations from Washington without the stations ever knowing about it. On Sunday night I got permission from Mac Bundy to fill in Newton Minow on Monday morning about it because he, being head of the FCC, was important to the success of it. I was given permission to call Newt Minow on Monday morning and I called first thing Monday morning only to find that he had just flown to New York, to give a speech. So I tracked him down in New York and told him he must fly back to Washington immediately. I couldn't tell him on the phone what it was, but it was more important than anything. He got right on the plane and came back and came to my office about 11:30 and I told him about the radio station operation and he got one or two of his righthand men and they agreed that this was legal, that it could be done; they looked into their records to see that

the right people were tabbed. We had a meeting that day with Minow, myself and Salinger and a carefully worked-out arrangement was made whereby Salinger would call up those eleven owners, one after the other, in rapid-fire order, starting at 6 o'clock that night. The speech was to be at 7. And we even wrote out on a piece of paper what he would say to each of them -- the same thing -- that this was a matter of national emergency, that he was speaking on behalf of the President, and we had phone lines arranged. I sat in Salinger's office and he called them all up, one after another - the operator had all the calls stacked up. Each man said yes, he would do it and the minute he said 'yes' I was on an open line to Henry Loomis, the Director of Voice of America, and I would say, 'such and such a radio station in Miami says yes' and then the phone line would be put in. Although the calls only started at 6 o'clock, by 7 o'clock when President Kennedy went on the air all of those radio stations turned off their American broadcasts and picked up the Voice of America in Spanish live. They stayed on the air for almost a month thereafter carrying the Voice of America at night. They didn't do it during the daytime in most cases because they couldn't be heard in Cuba during the daytime. That's how we informed the Cuban people of the American

side of the missile crisis story.

"There was a directive put out on Tuesday which specifically included me as a member of EXCOM, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, and I sat in on all the EXCOM meetings until the end of the crisis. Of course there's a great deal we did that can be better covered by others. One of the major efforts I was concerned with was in the field of pictures. There's no question but that the release of the pictures of the missile emplacements in Cuba had a great deal to do with changing world opinion -- which I think started out to be very, well I won't say negative, but very questioning about the President's speech. Actually the President's original inclination was not to release the pictures and we had quite an argument at one meeting of EXCOM about whether to release them or not. In fact what happened was that they were sent out to major European capitals to be shown to top government officials only. In London -- due to, I think, a combination of desire on the part of some of our people in the London Embassy and a certain amount of mishap -- they were shown to the press and got on television. Then the pictures were truly out of the bag and they were released back in Washington and it was the best thing that ever happened. The truth of the matter is it was not calculated that way. I really think they would

have been released the next day anyway because I think we would have realized it was necessary; but it did happen by accident."

GREENFIELD: "Didn't you prepare a lot of pamphlets and things for dropping over Cuba in those days?"

WILSON: "Yes. One story that has not been told was a plan to have a massive leaflet drop over Havana and perhaps several other of the major urban centers in Cuba. I was given the responsibility for organizing this and the psychological warfare elements of the military services were put under me for this and we drew up a single-page pamphlet. On one side of the page was a full picture -- the clearest picture there was of a missile emplacement -- and on the other side in Spanish was a description of what the Russians were attempting to do by placing the missiles in Cuba. There was also a description of President Kennedy's actions in setting up the quarantine. The pamphlets were worked on in a most secret manner at the USLA and they were flown down to Ft. Bragg by one of our chief officers. He worked at Ft. Bragg with the Psychological Warfare Services of the U.S. Army, who had a printing press down there, and the U.S. Army printed up 6 million leaflets. These 6 million leaflets were loaded into plastic canisters and they were hooked up under fighter bomber aircraft and some of them were taken down to bases in Florida

and some were kept at Ft. Bragg. The situation was so set up that I was able to report to the President later in the week that if given 12 hours notice, we could deliver 6 million pamphlets onto the island of Cuba. The President never gave the order. In fact at that time I did not mention how many pamphlets there were, as I recall, and about a week later when the crisis had finally eased and Mr. Khrushchev had agreed to withdraw the missiles, the subject of the pamphlet drop came up. It was agreed that the pamphlet drop should be put into abeyance and it was at that time I revealed that there were 6 million of the pamphlets. The President burst into laughter when he heard that there were 6 million of them sitting around. They were eventually burned down at Ft. Bragg."

GREENFIELD: "Well, you saw the President as a potential candidate, then as a candidate and then as President. What changes did you notice, if any, during those days?"

WILSON: "Well, I must say he was certainly a more light hearted man before he became President than he was during the last year or so of his Presidency. He was still delightful and witty and all that, but the burdens of the office showed and there was, I thought, less casual banter than there used to be; he showed the burdens of the office at the end, I thought."

several times during the day. And I guess the same was really true when they were out of town."

GREENFIELD: "What about Teddy Kennedy? Was he a 'junior brother' or did he have a special role to play in those days?"

WILSON: "Oh, I'd say he was pretty much of a junior brother. He was the younger brother and they wanted to bring him along, but I don't think he had any particular role of adviser or anything like that."

WILSON: "I'm just wondering if there isn't more I should give -- more I might give on the Cuban missile crisis. It's been so completely covered. I might just give my impressions of Sunday morning, October 28, because it remains most vividly in my mind -- the Sunday morning following the Monday speech. It was Sunday morning that Khrushchev's message came in, in which he announced that he was going to withdraw the missiles. I remember it was a beautiful day and we met in the Cabinet Room at 10 o'clock --- we met twice a day -- and this was the regular 10 o'clock meeting. There was an exhilarating atmosphere that morning -- I think every man in that room felt exactly the same -- that the curtains had lifted -- because only 24 hours before it looked so dark -- one of our men had been shot down over Cuba, and I don't think anyone in that room, as well as a lot of people outside

that room, had not at least thought about the fact that war was perhaps almost upon us. I know I thought about it. I thought about it in terms of my family. I went home most of those nights about 1 or 2 o'clock and had about 4 or 5 hours sleep, and I remember on Friday and Saturday nights at home I literally wondered whether I'd come home the next night -- and then suddenly it all resolved itself, or became resolved on that Sunday morning, and the attitude was lighthearted in that room. I mean, all of a sudden this huge burden was lifted and I felt like laughing or yelling or dancing -- I was the youngest man there and I'm not saying anyone else felt like dancing, but that's the way I felt."

GREENFIELD: "Do you remember how the President felt?"

WILSON: "Yes, he was in great form -- he was in GREAT form. He was smiling and he was full of humour and he, too, had obviously felt a great burden lift. There was still a lot to do -- the meetings went on for quite some time after that -- but that was the turning point and it was a marvelous morning. I'll never forget it as long as I live."

GREENFIELD: "Are there any particular anecdotes that stick in your mind, or any particular instances when you saw the President that remain in your mind that you'd like to record?"